

Censorship in Czech and Hungarian Academic Publishing, 1969–1989: Snakes and Ladders. By Libora Oates-Indruchová. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 384 pp.

In *Snakes and Ladders*, Libora Oates-Indruchová constructs a rigorous theory of censorship based on the case of normalization-era Czechoslovakia (with Hungary as an asymmetrical comparison) and offers a compelling methodological vision for the future of cultural histories of state socialism. The book has been long in the making and, as a result, is layered in its source material and analysis. Originating in late 1990s Czech Republic with the author's interest in the scholarly writing and publishing practices of her own professors before 1989, its main source base was collected in the early 2000s: twenty oral history interviews with Czech academics and eight interviews with their Hungarian peers. The interviewees were chosen from among scholars active before 1989 who still enjoyed the professional appreciation of their peers in the post-socialist period, which underscores Oates-Indruchová's case for taking knowledge produced under state socialism and the agency of scholars seriously, yet also raises the question of how the boundaries between the scholarly and the non-scholarly have shifted over the past 50 years.

By the time the interviews were done, the “archive fever” of the 1990s was being critically reviewed,<sup>1</sup> whereas the “ethnography of the archive” strand of research had not yet been fully articulated in studies of state socialism.<sup>2</sup> This shows in Oates-Indruchová's approach to the book's archival source base. Chapter 2 reconstructs the official policies regulating scholarly life during normalization based on officially published documents from the Czechoslovak press that were collected in the 1960s and 1970s by the Radio Free Europe Research Institute and are now held at the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives in Budapest. The complex context of their collection, classification, and archival processing remains largely unexplored, and although this is unlikely to change the general outline of the party policy which they document, one wonders what

1 For example, Stephen Kotkin, “The State—Is It Us? Memoires, Archives, and Kremlinologists,” *Russian Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 35–51.

2 This strand of research has picked up in the 2010s, in works such as: Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truth: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2014); Ioana Macrea-Toma, “The Eyes of Radio Free Europe: Regimes of Visibility in the Cold War Archives,” *East Central Europe* 44, no. 1 (2017): 99–127, and her introduction to the edited issue.

Oates-Indruchová's sophisticated methodological approach to the oral history interviews would yield if it were applied to this archival source base as well. As for the archives of the Editorial Board of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, they represent the counterpart to Chapter 4, where they are carefully discussed in the footnotes. To use the author's conceptual distinction borrowed from James C. Scott, the "public transcript" of party and state institutions is thus "hidden" in what is doubtlessly Oates-Indruchová's conscious choice to put the voices of the scholars themselves center stage.

These voices form the core of the book, five chapters which weave together the interviewees' recollections on themes related to academic writing and publishing during the normalization period in Czechoslovakia: the institutional and personal strategies for surviving and navigating the constraints on academic scholarship after the Prague Spring (Chapter 3); the "highway code" of the publication process which saw a manuscript through various institutional loops (Chapter 4); censorship (including self-censorship, "friendly censorship," and post-publication censorship) and how it related to authorship and authoring, that is, the articulation of the authorial self (Chapter 5); the language of publishing, from the acceptability of various research topics to the scholarly vocabulary to the use of subversive "code" (Chapter 6); and perceptions on the past and the afterlife of state socialist scholarly practices in the narrators' present (Chapter 7). These five chapters are structured as "imagined conversations" among the Czech scholars in which Hungarian authors intervene as a counterpart to the Czech story. They consist of quotes from the oral history interviews, identified through a pseudonym (which indicates the age cohort, gender, nationality, and profession of the narrator) and ordered by the author with minimal textual interventions in her capacity of a "novice" initiated by her "mentors" in the workings of academic publishing under state socialism. This unique approach, dubbed "post-academic writing," takes inspiration from feminist methodology and literary studies. As Oates-Indruchová argues in the introduction, it seeks to "make visible the lives and experiences of my narrators, treat them ethically by allowing them to represent themselves to the greatest possible degree, make visible the power relationship of the research situation, and lay the research process bare, while not shunning the emotional and the subjective." Eight photographs placed immediately before and after the oral history chapters stand as visual representation of this fraught, usually invisible process.

The last chapter of the book is a rigorously crafted theory of academic publishing and censorship under state socialism, which (despite the fact that

the author gives her reader permission to skip it in the introduction) is likely to become the go-to text on the topic for the university classroom and for scholars of intellectual production under late socialism. Oates-Indruchová argues that although the system of ideological control tightened from 1969 onwards, there was a noticeable shift in its target from content to form, or from scholars' convictions to the appearance of loyalty. The system suffered from over-centralization, and scholars responded by developing a host of individual and institutional strategies to survive repression, the access to and experience of which were divided along generational lines. The "publish and perish" dynamics of academic publishing under state socialism meant that a manuscript's entire journey from inception to publication was fraught with danger and regulated by an intricate code which was neither transparent nor entirely predictable.

Oates-Indruchová considers who could publish, how a text was approved, how the process could be helped or hindered and through whose agency, what was considered unpublishable, and what happened when the unpublishable was published. She distinguishes between (the authors' experiences of) no censorship and preventive, post-publishing, and self-censorship, offering rich accounts of each. Most interestingly, Oates-Indruchová pairs censorship with authorship, highlighting how the pervasiveness of the first, especially in its preventive forms, contributed to the attrition of the latter. It is on the issue of censorship that the cases of Czechoslovakia and Hungary appear to diverge the most, suggesting the potential for a broader comparative analysis of the issue in the countries of East Central Europe. As a consequence of the politicization of research topics and the erosion of scholarly language, Oates-Indruchová argues, authors invested in the idea that a "code of communication" existed between them and the readers. Showing how elusive such a complex code is, she concludes that what developed was rather a vocabulary of expressions – the meanings of which were quickly lost for the post-1989 generations. The latter observation in particular leads Oates-Indruchová to explore the authors' perceptions of the past and the consequences the system had for the interviewees in the present, both in terms of a lasting ideological dualism and the practices of academic research, publishing, and employment.

Oates-Indruchová has crafted a study of censorship at a time when both the fervent debates of the 1990s over issues of coercion, collaboration, and, importantly, moral responsibility have waned and the notion of writing against the totalitarian paradigm in studies of state socialism has itself become something of a cliché. This allows her both to state carefully and to answer unequivocally the

main dilemma of the book in the introduction: why do some authors experience censorship as a set of practices which has the potential to nurture creativity while other authors experience it simply as stifling? The key is in the double effect of censorship, broadly defined, of creating (self-contained) academic communities of trust on the one hand and instilling a hyper-attentiveness to language in both authors and readers on the other. Oates-Indruchová shows that both have productive and restrictive dimensions, reflected in the authors' contradictory evaluations of the past. Ultimately, however, she concludes that the game of "snakes and ladders" to which she compares academic publishing under state socialism worked to the detriment of authors, scholarship, and readers. Oates-Indruchová's volume stands as an innovative model of how to explore a complexly mediated past through oral history and overcome legacies of dualistic thinking, overly cautious scholarship, and limited communication within and among self-contained academic communities.

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